

New dike to revive long-dry Shillapoo Lake

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For half a century, Shillapoo Lake has existed in name only.

That will change, at least in part, beginning this summer. The south end of the old lake bed, separated from the Columbia River by a series of dikes and converted to farmland in the 1950s, will benefit from a new dike designed to restore rather than eradicate natural habitat in the Vancouver Lake lowlands.

The new dike will cause rainwater to pool in Shillapoo's southern end, creating a shallow lake covering 150 acres.

Funded by \$203,000 in federal wetland restoration grants secured by the conservation group Ducks Unlimited, earthmovers will begin work sometime late this summer.

Engineers expect the dike, running along a boundary between the state wildlife refuge and grazing land, to fill with precipitation and groundwater during winter and dry out in the summer. State wildlife managers say fish won't be able to use the 4-foot-deep lake, but providing salmon habitat isn't the goal restoring native wetland vegetation is.

"Our goal is to remove reed canary grass," said Brian Calkins, Shillapoo area manager for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The invasive grass, which grows thick and taller than a person, crowds out native vegetation.

By covering the grass with water in the early spring, when it typically germinates, Calkins figures later-blooming water smartweeds, plantains and wapato will eventually win out.

"It gives them a competitive advantage," he said.

To that end, excavators will scoop out 15,000 cubic yards of intermingled dirt and reed canary grass later this summer. They will use the material to build a 4,000-foot-long dike, 6 1/2 feet in height, running roughly perpendicular from the nearby Erwin O. Rieger Memorial Highway.

Calkins said the dike will enable a private landowner to continue farming, while maintaining options for other environmental improvements in the future.

The Army Corps of Engineers, for example, is still working on a \$5.5 million plan to breach several dikes and restore habitat in the lowlands as part of a program to offset damage from deepening the Columbia's shipping channel from 40 to 43 feet. The state-funded Lower Columbia River Fish Recovery Board has pushed for restoring the entire 900-acre bed of Shillapoo Lake by breaching the existing levee along the Columbia and allowing the river to reclaim its historic flood plain.

A corps spokesman said biologists are still designing the plan for Shillapoo, and the corps won't begin work there until next summer at the earliest.

Once the new dike is built, biologists said they hope the southern end of Shillapoo Lake will begin to resemble the marshy area that would have existed a century ago before the Columbia River was diked, dammed, dredged and otherwise developed to meet human needs.

"It's not natural, but we're never going to restore natural hydrology in the lower Columbia River," said Steve Donavan, regional biologist for Ducks Unlimited in Vancouver. "All we can do is make the best of a bad situation."